Salem Witch Trials

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The infamous Salem witch trials began during the spring of 1692, after a group of young girls in Salem Village, Massachusetts, claimed to be possessed by the devil and accused several local women of witchcraft. As a wave of hysteria spread throughout colonial Massachusetts, a special court convened in Salem to hear the cases; the first convicted witch, Bridget Bishop, was hanged that June. Eighteen others followed Bishop to Salem's Gallows Hill, while some 150 more men, women and children were accused over the next several months.

By September 1692, the hysteria had begun to abate and public opinion turned against the trials. Though the Massachusetts General Court later annulled guilty verdicts against accused witches and granted indemnities to their families, bitterness lingered in the community, and the painful legacy of the Salem witch trials would endure for centuries.

What Caused the Salem Witch Trials?: Context & Origins

Belief in the supernatural—and specifically in the devil's practice of giving certain humans (witches) the power to harm others in return for their loyalty—had emerged in Europe as early as the 14th century, and was widespread in colonial New England. In addition, the harsh realities of life in the rural Puritan community of Salem Village (present-day Danvers, Massachusetts) at the time included the after-effects of a British war with France in the American colonies in 1689, a recent smallpox epidemic, fears of attacks from neighboring Native American tribes and a longstanding rivalry with the more affluent community of Salem Town (present-day Salem).

Amid these simmering tensions, the Salem witch trials would be fueled by residents' suspicions of and resentment toward their neighbors, as well as their fear of outsiders.

Did you know?

In an effort to explain by scientific means the strange afflictions suffered by those "bewitched" Salem residents in 1692, a study published in *Science* magazine in 1976 cited the fungus ergot (found in rye, wheat and other cereals), which toxicologists say can cause symptoms such as delusions, vomiting and muscle spasms.

In January 1692, 9-year-old Elizabeth (Betty) Parris and 11-year-old Abigail Williams (the daughter and niece of Samuel Parris, minister of Salem Village) began having fits, including violent contortions and uncontrollable outbursts of screaming. After a local doctor, William Griggs, diagnosed bewitchment, other young girls in the community began to exhibit similar symptoms, including Ann Putnam Jr., Mercy Lewis, Elizabeth Hubbard, Mary Walcott and Mary Warren.

In late February, arrest warrants were issued for the Parris' Caribbean slave, Tituba, along with two other women—the homeless beggar Sarah Good and the poor, elderly Sarah Osborn—whom the girls accused of bewitching them.

Salem Witch Trial Victims: How the Hysteria Spread

The three accused witches were brought before the magistrates Jonathan Corwin and John Hathorne and questioned, even as their accusers appeared in the courtroom in a grand display of spasms, contortions, screaming and writhing. Though Good and Osborn denied their guilt, Tituba confessed. Likely seeking to save herself from certain conviction by acting as an informer, she claimed there were other witches acting alongside her in service of the devil against the Puritans.

As hysteria spread through the community and beyond into the rest of Massachusetts, a number of others were accused, including Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse—both regarded as upstanding members of church and community—and the four-year-old daughter of Sarah Good.

Like Tituba, several accused "witches" confessed and named still others, and the trials soon began to overwhelm the local justice system. In May 1692, the newly appointed governor of Massachusetts, William Phips, ordered the establishment of a special Court of Oyer (to hear) and Terminer (to decide) on witchcraft cases for Suffolk, Essex and Middlesex counties.

Presided over by judges including Hathorne, Samuel Sewall and William Stoughton, the court handed down its first conviction, against Bridget Bishop, on June 2; she was hanged eight days later on what would become known as Gallows Hill in Salem Town. Five more people were hanged that July; five in August and eight more in September. In addition, seven other accused witches died in jail, while the elderly Giles Corey (Martha's husband) was pressed to death by stones after he refused to enter a plea at his arraignment.

Salem Witch Trials: Conclusion and Legacy

Though the respected minister Cotton Mather had warned of the dubious value of spectral evidence (or testimony about dreams and visions), his concerns went largely unheeded during the Salem witch trials. Increase Mather, president of Harvard College (and Cotton's father) later joined his son in urging that the standards of evidence for witchcraft must be equal to those for any other crime, concluding that "It would be better that 10 suspected witches may escape than one innocent person be condemned."

Amid waning public support for the trials, Governor Phips dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer in October and mandated that its successor disregard spectral evidence. Trials continued with dwindling intensity until early 1693, and by that May Phips had pardoned and released all those in prison on witchcraft charges.

In January 1697, the Massachusetts General Court declared a day of fasting for the tragedy of the Salem witch trials; the court later deemed the trials unlawful, and the leading justice Samuel Sewall publicly apologized for his role in the process. The damage to the community lingered, however, even after Massachusetts Colony passed legislation restoring the good names of the condemned and providing financial restitution to their heirs in 1711.

Indeed, the vivid and painful legacy of the Salem witch trials endured well into the 20th century, when Arthur Miller dramatized the events of 1692 in his play "The Crucible" (1953), using them as an allegory for the anti-Communist "witch hunts" led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. A memorial to the victims of the Salem witch trials was dedicated on August 5, 1992, by author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.